Blackburn's *Ruling Passions*: A Partial Reply[1]

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Ruling Passions is Simon Blackburn's latest attempt to defend a theory of practical reason which he calls "expressivism".[2] In the first three chapters Blackburn outlines an account of how we should understand statements of right, good and virtue, as well as their negative counterparts ("the Ethical [or Moral] Proposition", as he terms this amalgam). This he calls "quasi-realism". I shall describe what this position entails in the first section. Secondly I shall consider the opposition to this view advanced by McDowell (1987), who in turn takes his inspiration from Wiggins (1976a, 1976b). Finally I shall assess Blackburn's reply to McDowell and Wiggins (found in Chapter 4 of *RP*), and argue that it is inadequate.

1. Quasi-Realism

Blackburn begins by noticing that "ethics is a practical subject, manifested in our reactions to things and the motivations we feel" (*RP*, p. 1). Already implicit is Blackburn's Humeanism: we do not *have* motivations; we "feel" them. The Humean assumption, then, is that "reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions" (*Treatise*, Bk. II, Pt. III, Sect. III). Thus if ethics is practical, and we require the passions to act, it follows that ethics cannot but be about the passions. This is the guiding theme of the book, and is the central assumption of quasi-realism.

For Blackburn, the distinction between reason and passion corresponds to our more familiar folk-psychological distinction between beliefs and desires (or "attitudes"), which in turn lines up with a linguistic distinction between describing and valuing. "Valuing something ... is not to be understood as *describing* it in certain terms, any more than hoping for or desiring something are describing it in particular terms. ... When [people] value things, they express themselves in terms of what is good, bad, obligatory, right, justifiable, and so on" (*RP*, p. 49). For Blackburn, the ethical

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[2] *Ruling Passions* is hereafter *RP*. Expressivism was first presented in his *Spreading the Word*, hereafter *SW*; and elaborated in, e.g. Blackburn 1985, 1994.

proposition is essentially an expression of our attitudes, rather than an expression of belief.

One might at this stage be forgiven for thinking that Blackburn will run into familiar non-cognitivist difficulties, such as explaining the *prima facie* truth of moral propositions, which might force him to conclude with Mackie, that this is strictly an error. But not a bit of it. Blackburn wants to insist that the expressive nature of the moral proposition does not stop us from acknowledging that it can be legitimately true or false. Quasi-realism is not an error theory (*RP*, p. 301; *SW*, p. 180). Quasi-realism is a "constructive" story of how truth in ethics can be achieved, which runs along the following lines (first mentioned in *RP* at, p. 77, n. 22). Our attitudes towards things turn out to be generally stable and co-incide with each other's to a good degree. What is more, we have attitudes - such as admiration or disapproval - towards *other people's* attitudes, and from this it follows that attitudes themselves become subject to our rational criticism. This in turn means that we end up with moral talk which is couched in terms of moral "beliefs", which are capable of "truth" and "falsity", in virtue of representing the moral "facts". So far so "quasi".

But is it *realism*? Blackburn argues that because of the truth of "minimalism about truth" (*RP*, pp. 77-83) which he finds in the later Wittgenstein, we should not think that these "moral beliefs" are somehow second-class pretenders in their claims to truth. "[M]inimalism about truth allows us to end up saying 'It is true that kindness is good'. For this means no more than that kindness is good, an attitude that we may properly want to express" (*RP*, p. 79). Thus, Blackburn claims, he can have his cake and eat it. "We can throw in mention of reality: ethical propositions are really true" (*RP*, p. 79).

Prima facie this seems hard to accept. On the one hand Blackburn makes a claim about the distinctiveness of the moral proposition - it is essentially an expression of attitude; and on the other, minimalism would seem to commit him to denying that there could be anything distinctive which separates the moral proposition from any other kind. Consider: what is preventing us from thinking of *describing* as expressing an "attitude", just like an evaluation. (Call it a "neutral", or an "objective", or an "I'm just interested in the facts", attitude). If Blackburn is happy with his eventual concession that we can "throw in mention of [moral] reality", what is to stop us from having

"thrown in" *descriptions* of "moral reality" at the Humean beginnings? In other words, what we thought was a distinction between a description (e.g. "x is green") and an expression of attitude (e.g. "x is good"), in fact, if we accept minimalism, turns out to have been no distinction at all: both are given the status of perfectly good descriptions of "reality" ("x is green" is no more or less descriptive than "x is good"). We now find it impossible to begin the Humean construction which relies upon this distinction. Unless Blackburn can give us some independent way of distinguishing descriptions from evaluations, it looks as if there is an instability threatening his position.

Blackburn, of course, denies any such instability. Indeed he anticipates the objection that "'the 'quasi-realist' construction has bitten off its own tail" (*RP*, p. 79).[3] The charge of tail-biting would be justified, because the construction, "starts from a contrast between expressing belief and expressing an attitude, which it then undermines, by showing how the expression of attitudes takes on all the trappings of belief" (*RP*, p. 79). But Blackburn claims that this is no objection:

> We must remember Wittgenstein's dismissive attitude to truth and representation when he is dealing with the kinds of commitment that interested him. Just *because* of minimalism about truth and representation, there is no objection to tossing them in for free, at the end. [Quoting Wittgenstein, *PI* II, p. 224], 'we remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike'. Our understanding of the kinds of activity involved in specific, ethical, states of mind remain in place, driving the construction of the moral proposition. If we started and finished with a special, *sui generis* representation of moral aspects of the world, we would be drawing a blank. But by starting elsewhere, we can see what is right and justified about finishing saying some of the things Moore did when he spoke in these terms. By getting there this way, however, we have a complete answer to difficulties that destabilize Moore's own package, notably the questions of epistemology, and of why we should be concerned about the ethical properties of things. For we have the answer: what we describe as the ethical properties of things are constructed precisely in order to reflect our concerns. (*RP*, p. 80).

There are two issues raised here about Blackburn's ambitions, both related to his perhaps uneasy self-identification with Wittgenstein. First, a Wittgensteinian thought to which Blackburn might be expected to be sympathetic: why should we think that

[3] Blackburn is I think here responding to a similar point to mine, made by Crispin Wright (1985).

there is any *one thing* in common to all those diverse statements which come under the rubric "the moral proposition", which would be suited to a single story?[4] Specifically, I am thinking of the distinction between "evaluations" and "directives or deliberative (or practical) judgements" drawn by Wiggins (1976a, pp. 95-6); the latter having a more obvious connection to action than the former. We may well require separate stories about each of these categories, and further, we perhaps should not assume at the outset that these two categories exhaust "the ethical proposition" altogether. Blackburn, however, makes nothing of this distinction.

Second, a similarly Wittgensteinian thought: it is not at all clear why we need any "constructive" work in order to agree with Blackburn's final "answer" above (though we could perhaps omit the words "are constructed precisely in order to" without loss). To understand that "kindness" is an ethical property, *is* just to understand that calling something kind reflects our concerns (under some construal of "our concerns"). This is to say no more than a property which had *no* connection to our concerns would simply not rightly be called an *ethical* property. This much is a platitude (what Wittgenstein might have called a "reminder") about what we call "ethical properties". (Which is not to say it is "analytic" - if it is analytic, it would have to be made true by some suitably refined understanding of "our concerns"). It is not clear, then, that we need Blackburn's "constructive" account in order to accept a rather uncontentious truth.

Does Blackburn's reply get him out of the instability mentioned earlier? It is not clear that "[o]ur understanding of the kinds of activity involved in specific, ethical, states of mind" *does* "remain in place" after we have made the concession to minimalism. However, Blackburn offers us a way of delivering "a contrast between 'representing the ethical facts' and 'representing natural facts'" which could avoid the instability. Though he writes that "[i]t is hard to say" in what this contrast could consist, he continues:

> Obviously there will be some differences between 'ethical facts' and others. The fact that there is a cannonball on the cushion explains why it is sagging in the middle. The fact that kindness is good explains no such kind of thing. We do not expect laws of ethics to play a role in treatises of physics. Probably the most promising way of finding contrasts

[4] See, e.g. Wittgenstein's comments on "family resemblances", *PI* §§66-77.

> would be to think more about the adaptive mechanism that make us sensitive to physical fact, in contrast with the adaptive mechanism that give us an ethical motivational system. The adaptive stories will surely be sufficiently different to give vastly different accounts of 'representation' (*RP*, p. 80)

Here is the dilemma Blackburn faces. If on the one hand, we only have the above "adaptive mechanism" account with which to draw the distinction between "ethical facts" and others, it is now unclear what explanatory work is done by Blackburn's Humean construction, which claims that the "specific, ethical, states of mind" are understood with essential reference to attitudes (with no mention of "adaptive mechanisms"). If on the other hand, the "adaptive mechanism" account is optional (as Blackburn's rhetoric above suggests), minimalism loses an account of the distinction between evaluation and description and the instability mentioned earlier remains a threat.

How might Blackburn respond? The obvious way would be to say that he can rely on an "intuitive" distinction between descriptions such as "x is green" and evaluations such as "x is good". They wear their descriptive or evaluative statuses on their sleeves. Our intuitions would also be with Blackburn with his claim that even though "x is good" is a description, it is also one that expresses an attitude. Accepting this "intuitive" route would get him off the instability charge. The problem is, if he were to accept these claims "intuitively", it no longer seems that the quasi-realist construction from Humean beginnings has any explanatory work to do: it is asserting the obvious.

Perhaps, though, quasi-realism does give us more in the way of understanding than our intuitions initially suggest. But as we shall see, the Humeanism upon which it relies may be more of a hindrance than a help.

2. Wiggins & McDowell

There is a view of moral discourse offered by McDowell and Wiggins which stands in opposition to Blackburn's. Their view does not seek to "begin" with the Humean distinction between belief and attitude, and "construct" beliefs from our attitudes. ("Beginning" with the intuition that beliefs and desires are distinct existences is perhaps questionable anyway. Notice the intuitive equivalence of "I believe that cake is delicious" and "I desire that cake". We must at least have some refinements of the

everyday terms in mind in order to maintain the Humean distinctness of these "existences".) The Wiggins/McDowell view rather gives an account of how our moral discourse actually works, and only then describes any ontological commitments that may be implicit in such discourse. So whereas Blackburn *ends* his constructive account with minimalism about truth, McDowell and Wiggins could be understood as *beginning* with minimalism. By doing this, there is no need to insist on the strong Humean dichotomy between belief and desire; and no need to insist that "the ethical proposition" *essentially* expresses "attitudes" (and nor, as we shall see in section 3, is there any need to deny some strong relation).

In "Projection and Truth in Ethics" (1987) McDowell offers some objections to Blackburn's earlier statements of quasi-realism (*SW* and Blackburn 1981, 1985), which he used to term "projectivism".[5] (I will address the question whether Blackburn has met these objections in *Ruling Passions* in the next section). I will focus here on what I take to be McDowell's main objection to quasi-realism: its explanatory poverty.

McDowell takes Blackburn to be offering his position as a corrective to a "realist intuitionism" which takes a moral property to be "a property that some things have intrinsically or absolutely, independently of their relations to us", reactions to which would "constitute a kind of perception" (McDowell 1987, p. 151). McDowell agrees with Blackburn that such a view is "confused". However, McDowell disagrees that quasi-realism is the only alternative. Whereas quasi-realism reverses the order of explanation, so that instead of the property being prior to the reaction, the reaction is prior to the property. As Blackburn writes, "[The realist intuitionist] holds that the moral features of things are the parents of our sentiments, whereas the Humean [quasi-realist] holds that they are their children" (Blackburn 1981, p. 165). However, McDowell and Wiggins favour a "no-priority" view, in which the properties and sentiments are "siblings", as it were "made for one other" (McDowell 1987, p. 159; Wiggins 1976b, p. 195, n. 16). Why should we prefer the no-priority view to quasi-realism?

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[5] In these earlier statements, Blackburn employed the notions of "projection", and "projectivism", which he later drops "because it can sound misleading" (*RP*, p. 77). However, I take it that this is a matter of terminological nicety, and Blackburn has not changed his "core claim", thus McDowell's arguments, if valid, remain so. As McDowell uses the earlier terminology I will use it here without prejudice.

McDowell's argument runs thus. Taking the example of something's being comic, McDowell recognises that there will be a "subjective state" associated with something's being comic. However, when we ask what this state is, we cannot be very specific. We might say "an inclination to laugh", but that cannot be sufficient because we might exhibit this state when we are not reacting to things that are comic: when we are embarrassed, or relieved, for example. We know that the concepts of the comic, embarrassment and relief are all distinct because when we learn these concepts, mastery is attributed in different ways - sometimes a criterion of mastery will be how a person *reacts*; sometimes (and typically for the comic) a criterion will be what she reacts *to*. But the projectivist's difficulty is that if he tries to be more specific about the subjective state explaining the comic, he cannot make reference to the fact that something in the world is actually comic. For that would be to concede the inadequacy of the projectivist's claim that nothing in the world is actually comic. As McDowell concludes:

> Surely it undermines a projective account of a concept if we cannot home in on the subjective state whose projection is supposed to result in the seeming feature of reality in question without the aid of the concept of that feature, the concept that was to be projectively explained. (McDowell 1987, p. 158).

Of course, if the projectivist were to claim that "subjective states" neatly line up with each subjective concept, he would, of course succeed. But as the examples of embarrassment and relief show, this would presumably be by fiat; victory would be hollow.

If projectivism is to supply an adequate account of subjective concepts, it must supply materials to explain the distinction between the various different concepts which might be associated with the same kind of reaction. The projectivist restricts himself to "subjective states" as the only available materials with which to do the explaining, and in so far as he fails to individuate these states as finely as the concepts themselves, his account fails. The advantage of the no-priority view of McDowell and Wiggins, is that we do not restrict ourselves to subjective states to explain the subjective concepts: both response and property are available for the purpose. (This is to say nothing of the difficulties to which the no-priority view may be subject, but they must be dealt with elsewhere.)

McDowell does, of course, rely upon the perhaps contentious claim that moral properties are subjective in the same sense that the comic is; but as Blackburn does not dispute this, it is unlikely to provide a point of disagreement.

3. Blackburn's Reply

In *Ruling Passions* (pp. 92-104), Blackburn attempts his reply. According to Blackburn, amongst the "bad things" that McDowell emphasises are the following two: "the unearned emphasis on 'receptivity' or the belief that some kind of cognitivism has been established, and the unfortunate hostility to the essential business of factoring out the inputs and the outputs of our evaluative practices" (*RP*, p. 104). I shall consider these objections in turn.[6]

3.1 Blackburn's Objections to Cognitivism

Blackburn's objection to cognitivism has two aspects. First, he thinks that to account for our moral reaction to the world as being "'receptive' to a property that is there independently" (*RP*, p. 95), is at the very least, using the terms unnaturally. In the case of Blackburn's self-styled predicate "fat↓" (read as "Down with fat!"), he objects to talk of "receptivity": "[o]n the face of it, nothing of this sort is true" (*RP*, p. 95).[7] In the case

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[6] I should point out what appears to be simply a misreading of McDowell by Blackburn. Blackburn writes that McDowell, in his (1987), "specifically exempts 'disgust' from what he wants to say about 'the field of ethics'" (*RP*, p. 95). If this were right, Blackburn would be justified in taking issue, pointing out that in some cultures "disgust is a prime arbiter of moral status" (*RP*, p. 95). But it is not right. In the paper concerned, McDowell asks us to "consider for instance the confused notion that that disgustingness is a property some things have *intrinsically or absolutely*, independently of their relations to us" (1987, p. 151, my emphasis). In other words he uses "disgust" as to illustrate how a realist account of properties might work; a view to which both he and Blackburn are opposed (though in different ways). In a later passage, McDowell once more employs "disgust, or nausea", this time to illustrate the quasi-realist view he is opposing. Here "disgust, or nausea" play the role of "self-contained psychological items" which (perhaps plausibly) are to be "projected" (1987, p. 157), a picture that McDowell goes on to reject. It is no part of McDowell's claim that "disgust" (or "nausea") are exempt from "the field of ethics".

[7] Blackburn's "fat↓" predicate is conceived as follows. We are to imagine "a culture in which excess body fat is regarded as perfectly alright, or even desirable", who use the term "fat"; and then "suppose that fashions change and there are people (slim, active, lithe teenagers, perhaps) who begin to find fat people disgusting ... they register this by a characteristic sneering tone of voice ... 'Oh he is *fat*'", written "fat↓" (*RP*, p. 95). Blackburn claims that "[w]e would certainly not be likely to say, for example, that there is a

of the fashion elite's attributions of "grossness" or "divinity" to clothing, Blackburn thinks that talk of "perception" of a "property" which has a "cognitive status", is "really rather odd" (*RP*, p. 97). Further on still, Blackburn writes:

> it seems obvious that the ecstasies and derisions, themselves caused by various features (originality, cost, surprise factor, impracticality), drive the application of "gross" or "divine", but not at all obvious that the situation is usefully thought about in terms of perception of grossness or divinity (*RP*, p. 98).

By putting things in this way it is clear that Blackburn does not intend a knock-down argument against McDowell. But what is less clear is why Blackburn finds the above "obvious". Perhaps this would be fair had he not been aware of a paper by Wiggins that he himself cites (e.g. *RP*, p. 99). For it seems clear that Wiggins would not deny that "gross" and "divine" would have "supporting considerations" (Wiggins 1976b, pp. 195-6); a point to which I shall return. But where Wiggins would disagree is that talk of "perception" is not useful. In his defence of the no-priority view Wiggins writes, "there will often be no saying exactly what reaction a thing with the associated property will provoke without direct or indirect allusion to the property itself" (Wiggins 1976b, p. 195). At the very least Blackburn is unpersuasive in his assertion that Wiggins' view is "obviously" wrong.

The second aspect of Blackburn's objection to cognitivism is potentially more telling. Blackburn writes:

> McDowell acknowledges the plausibility of a supervenience requirement in ethics, and distinguishes it from the requirement that the things judged the same at the supervening level should form a 'kind recognisable as such' at the subadjacent or underlying level. So the salient question is why, when a reaction is elicited by members of an otherwise shapeless class, it should be deemed a cognition, a recognition that 'the members of some specific set of values are genuine features of the world', rather than, say, an attitude or emotion, or eighteenth-century passion or sentiment (*RP*, p. 98).

Blackburn sees "no answer to this question". He helpfully elaborates the explanatory stories told by the rival views, McDowell's first (the arrows indicate some explanatory story):

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distinctive property of fat↓ness, and that the teenagers' shared reactions now enable them to detect it". However, I think that the way in which this predicate is set up is question-begging (see n. 12 below).

Cognitivism: Shapeless underlying class → shapely property M → perception of it by those with proper affective dispositions ≡ perception of a reason for action → action

Non-cognitivism: Shapeless underlying class → attitudes in those with specific affective dispositions → action (*RP*, pp. 98-9).

Blackburn then adds "if that is the line-up then we would have to ask what extra explanatory weight is added by the mention of the shapely property at the moral level, and by talk of perception, and there is no evident answer. Grossness and divinity are playing no explanatory role in the phenomena of fashion" (*RP*, p. 99).

But there are a number of answers available. I shall mention two. The first is a question of where the burden of proof lies. For it is not obvious that it is with McDowell. Both McDowell and Blackburn could agree that the fashion elite would typically speak in terms of "a gross dress", or "a divine hat". Blackburn might object that this would sound a little "odd", but there does seem to be at least a *prima facie* case for property talk, which might reverse the onus, and Blackburn has to show what is wrong with such talk. Perhaps, however, this is merely a clash of intuitions, and gets us no further.

The second answer concerns the explanatory power of the two accounts. There are a number of possible explanations of why the above fashion talk went as it did: (i) the dress was disapproved of, and the hat was adored; (ii) the dress was (in fact) gross, or the hat was divine; (iii) the dress was brown with purple spots, and the hat was broad-rimmed. Now Blackburn would presumably be happy to give explanations (i) and (iii), but not allow himself (ii). McDowell, however, could give any of these three explanations. We might at this point sympathise with Blackburn as explanation (ii) carries no extra explanatory weight: mention of a response's "sibling" - a property - adds nothing. But why *prohibit* it? In doing so, it seems that Blackburn is extremely confident that for any response-dependent concept, it will always be possible to explain a particular application in terms of a "shapeless underlying class". But this confidence might be unwarranted.

Wiggins writes, "There will be ... no saying, very often, what properties these names stand for independently of the reaction they provoke" (1976b, p. 195). If this is right, it ought to be at least plausible that on some occasions, somebody can be attributed with

mastery of a response-dependent concept, without there being any understanding (from her, or any perspective) of what features of things might be "underlying" the (perfectly correct) applications of that concept. Indeed, Blackburn's fashion examples of "gross" and "divine" seem to support this view. When we consider that such concepts might typically be taught by exposure to a few paradigms, we can readily appreciate that there may simply be no fact of the matter about which features "underlie" any application. (Of course our understanding of such applications might be "refined", and better understandings of underlying properties gained, but that this is a possibility need not imply that the pre-refinement concept was being applied in the same way.) If such cases do indeed exist, Blackburn's explanation (iii) would not be available, and what is more, we have some use for (ii). The "extra explanatory weight" of McDowell's account is thus supplied.[8]

3.2 Inputs, Outputs and "Splitting"

Now to Blackburn's second objection to McDowell: his "unfortunate hostility to the essential business of factoring out the inputs and the outputs of our evaluative practices" (*RP*, p. 104). What is this "factoring out"? Early in his book Blackburn writes:

> we can usefully compare the ethical agent to a device whose function is to take certain inputs and deliver certain outputs. The *input* to the system is a representation, for instance of an action, or a situation, or a character, of being of a certain type, as having certain properties. The *output*, we are saying, is a certain attitude, or a pressure on attitudes, or a favouring of policies, choices and actions (*RP*, p. 5).

Blackburn goes on to insist that "[i]t is only by thus 'splitting' the input and the output that the reaction can be seen sufficiently clearly for what it is. And this is important because only then can the reaction itself be intelligently discussed, and perhaps ... seen as highly questionable" (*RP*, p. 7). Later in the book Blackburn gives an example in which it is "*morally* vital" to "split" if we are to correct a pernicious chauvinistic use of

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[8] Even in cases when a "shapeless underlying class" does exist, explanation (iii) might still look suspect for Blackburn. For how is he going to explain the "shapeless underlying class" which consists of the properties "brown with purple spots" and "broad-rimmed"? At least the first of these is a response-dependent concept, which, one supposes, could not be understood in terms of a "shapeless underlying class". However, Blackburn does not commit himself to uniformity of accounts across all response-dependent concepts.

the word "cute". Speaking critically of what he takes to be McDowell's view, Blackburn writes, "if the last word is that these people perceive cuteness and react to it with the appropriate cuteness reaction, whereas other people do not, we have lost the analytic tools with which to recognize what is wrong with them" (*RP*, p. 101). Hence McDowell's purported failure, disguises "a conservative and ultimately self-serving complacency" (*RP*, p. 102).

Why should Blackburn think that McDowell refuses to "split" in this way? Blackburn assimilates McDowell's attack on "eighteenth-century philosophy of mind" with the refusal to "split". Such a philosophy of mind "makes a separation between genuine cognition, on the one hand, and passions and sentiments on the other" (*RP*, p. 97). And according to McDowell, this would constitute an *a priori* denial that we can think of "exercises of our affective or conatve natures either as themselves in some way percipient, or at least as expanding our sensitivity to how things are" (McDowell 1981, p. 200; quoted at *RP*, p. 97). McDowell, however, finds it "reasonable to be sceptical about whether the disentangling manoeuvre here envisaged can always be effected" (1981, p. 201). Blackburn, however, concludes from this that McDowell holds a rather peculiar thesis:

> So where we thought we had the affective on one side and the cognitive on the other, we now have only unified, single-rule guided, cognitive/affective states: 'besires', as these have been christened (*RP*, p. 95).[9]

This is peculiar because McDowell does not, in any of the writings that Blackburn cites, nor in any I have encountered, so much as mention a "besire", never mind a commitment to one. Certainly, if McDowell had been proposing this amalgamation of belief and desire - that is an *identity* claim - some of Blackburn's criticisms would have been well directed. Specifically Blackburn's accusation that McDowell refuses to "split". But does McDowell's attack on eighteenth-century philosophy of mind amount to a commitment to "besires" and hence a refusal to split? I think not.[10]

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[9] Blackburn cites Altham (1986) as the inventor of such states; though Altham's treatment is cursory to say the least (pp. 284-5).

[10] Blackburn also refers to the 'besire' claim as "very strange" (*RP*, p. 100) - McDowell might well agree!

I shall consider a McDowell paper that Blackburn cites, and then Wiggins' view. In his (1981) McDowell questions the possibility of "disentangling" cognitive from non-cognitive components of a value concept. McDowell is sceptical whether,

> for any value concept, one can *always* isolate a genuine feature of the world - by the appropriate standard of genuineness: that is, a feature that is there anyway, independently of anyone's value experience being as it is - to be that to which competent users of the concept are to be regarded as responding when they use it: that which is left in the world when one peels off the reflection of the appropriate attitude (1981, p. 201, my emphasis).

Note here that McDowell does not say that it is *never* possible to effect this "split" of cognitive and non-cognitive elements; only that it is unjustified to suppose that such a split *must* always be possible. It is this assumption that McDowell tries to expose as a prejudice. McDowell acknowledges the "supervenience" requirement of the evaluative on the descriptive, but writes "there need be no possibility of mastering, in a way that would enable one to go on to new cases, a term that is to function at the level supervened upon, but is to group together exactly the items to which the competent users would apply the supervening term" (1981, p. 202).[11] In denying that cognitive and non-cognitive states can *sometimes* not be disentangled, McDowell is not committed to the claim that there is no distinction at all, as the "besire" thesis would insist.[12]

Wiggins is more explicit about the importance of "splitting" (though he does not call it that):

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[11] Compare Blackburn, who claims that "[w]herever there is a 'thick' term it is *easy* to see both its general descriptive orientation, and its general practical or attitude-giving one. ... There is a circumscribed range of inputs and outputs. And this is how it has to be, for we have to know the kind of thing, at the 'subadjacent' level, to retail in order to engage someone's will when we are prescribing courses of action" (*RP*, pp. 102-3).

[12] Blackburn's "fat↓" predicate could not harm McDowell's claim here. (See n. 7). This is because "fat↓" can *ex hypothesi* be split into cognitive (things to which both "fat" and "fat↓" apply) and non-cognitive ("fat↓" applies, but not "fat") aspects. McDowell's claim does not rule out this possibility, but claims only that there may be actual "thick" predicates for which there is no prior isolable cognitive component. Presumably predicates which have not evolved in the way Blackburn suggests for "fat↓". Thus the "fat↓" predicate could not *show* that "thick" predicates can be "split", but presupposes it.

> Of course, when we dispute whether *x* is really funny, there is a whole wealth of considerations and explanations we can adduce, and by no means all of them have to be given in terms simply synonymous or interdefinable with 'funny'. We can do a little better than say that the funny is that which makes people laugh ... What is improbable in the extreme is that, either singly, or in concert, further explanations will ever add up to a *reduction* of the funny or serve to characterise it in purely natural terms. (Wiggins 1976b, pp. 195-6).

These "supporting considerations" have at least two roles which Wiggins brings out, which would not be possible if they were not features of the world. First, using such considerations, "one person can improve another's focus or discrimination of what is funny" (1976b, p. 196). Second, once the use of a concept is "well established, the response is corrigible by reference to the question whatever is required for the presence of the property present, and various supplementary considerations have become available that make possible the criticism, explanation, and vindication of attitudes and responses to a given thing" (1976b, p. 197).

In summary, neither McDowell nor Wiggins, hold a "besire" thesis as Blackburn suggests. It is important to Wiggins, and one would expect the same of McDowell, that it is possible to "split" the cognitive from the non-cognitive elements of a concept, and for the very reasons that Blackburn suggests are important. They would not even want to deny that such "splitting" is "*morally* vital". All that they would deny is that this "split" is *always* possible. The "entanglement" of cognitive and non-cognitive elements does not amount to a loss of the distinction altogether. They are not therefore, totally abandoning eighteenth-century philosophy of mind; only one of its perhaps more dubious assumptions. Blackburn's objection accordingly misses its target.

There is another objection to Blackburn's notion of "splitting" to which McDowell and Wiggins ought to be sympathetic. If it is right, it may show why the eighteenth-century philosophy of mind is not just unnecessary in a theory of ethics, but that it is actually a mistake.

Recall that for Blackburn, the "input" is "a representation, for instance of an action, or a situation, or a character, of being of a certain type, as having certain properties" (*RP*, p. 5). There is, then, for Blackburn, a restriction on the *kind* of considerations that

could be cited in the "*morally* vital" task of criticising pernicious views. Specifically we could not employ evaluative concepts. But there would seem to be nothing wrong with the thought that as long as we could express the "input" in terms that our interlocutor was familiar, this could constitute criticism sufficient for the intended purpose of reform. We could say that what is wrong with the people who refer to women as "cute" is that assimilating women to furry animals is a bad thing, or women have a right to your respect. Neither of these could count as *bona fide* "input", as by Blackburn's lights, they express attitudes, though they might well suffice to do the critical job. In other words, Blackburn's insistence on the eighteenth century "split" between a purely cognitive "input" and a non-cognitive "output" is not the only way of achieving successful criticism. Indeed, if our chauvinist interlocutor was not familiar with our strictly cognitive descriptions, and we were to follow Blackburn's advice, our efforts might be utterly ineffectual. It is not just that we might not need the purely cognitive description of the "input", when it comes to moral criticism, it might prove a positive hindrance.

McDowell for one, would surely resist any insistence on a conception of the world viewed, as he puts it, "from sideways on", that is, "from outside any practices or forms of life partly constituted by local or parochial modes of response to the world" (1981, p. 214). If Blackburn's notion of an "input" to a moral sensibility is of that kind, it will not only be subject to the above objection, but also to the many criticisms McDowell himself has brought against such a conception of the world.

Conclusion

Although much of what Blackburn writes in *Ruling Passions* makes a valuable contribution to contemporary moral theory, his attempt to defend quasi-realism against McDowell and Wiggins, fails. Of course Blackburn is right to emphasise the perhaps neglected role of the passions in moral theory - witness the rise of neo-Kantianism in contemporary moral theory. Thus far, *Ruling Passions* must be a valuable corrective. However, in so far as Blackburn insists on the Humean split between reason and passion, his claims seem too strong.

Humean philosophy of mind and minimalism about truth are uneasy bed partners. The former makes it look as if evaluations are somehow second-class facts, when

compared with their genuinely cognitive counterparts; whereas minimalism denies that there could be any such distinction. But although it may seem that the task for the Humean is to show how evaluations become eligible for truth, in fact her attention should be no less directed at their supposedly unproblematic descriptive siblings. For how can these be available to a sensibility which is, as Blackburn insists, shot through with passion? Our problem will be suspending our passions sufficiently to gain access to the realm of affect-free, true cognition. In our enthusiasm to accept the Humean split as the way to bring out the role of the passions, we might have lost our epistemic grip on our very paradigm of truth.

Of course one answer would be to drop our insistence on the Humean split as Wiggins and McDowell, have done. And this need imply neither that "splitting" of a morally important kind is not possible; nor that we lose the belief/desire distinction altogether. The worrying news for the quasi-realist account of ethics is that without the Humeanism, there is nothing left worthy of that name.

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